

Reminiscences

Duxbury, a Summer Idyll (among other things!)

One of my loveliest, most poignant memories of this period during the post-war twenties was our annual pilgrimage to, and our life in, our summer house in **Duxbury**, Massachusetts. My parents bought the house in 1921, when I was a year-and-a-half old. The memories of our summer days in that sheltering house are checkered by everyday delight and occasional incomprehensible nightmares. The joys were many, and irresistible! Our life in the absence of my father, who only came down from Boston on weekends, was pure delight.

The first summer there, my mother made us all Robin Hood costumes of "Lincoln green," which we wore for our games of besting the sheriff of Nottingham, played in and out of the dense shrubbery that bordered our house and the public library next door. I don't remember a lot about those games, but we seem to have played them fairly often, my older sister Jeanne doubtless playing the role of Maid Marion and Donnie, one of the twins, Robin himself. Davie, his twin, was probably Little John, and I may have been Will Scarlet. Billy was not a part of the game, having been born during our second summer in Duxbury.

But our life in **Duxbury** gradually became a bewildering mix for me of such intensely pleasurable - and of equally intensely terrifying episodes, as I will explain. It is still hard for me to separate those two aspects of that life. They happened in **Duxbury** rather than in West Newton because my father was too busy to spend much time with his family in West Newton, but was free from that obligation on the weekends he spent with us in **Duxbury**, away from his obstetrical practice.

These strange nightmare images connected with my father and **Duxbury** have only gradually come back to me over the years. Some of these episodes were not purely accidental, but were generated out of my father's temperamental explosiveness. My aunt Katie writes about an outing in which the entire family participated which is so eloquent and truthful in the ambiance it evokes of the atmosphere of our summers with my father that I need to reproduce it here.

We ... had shipped down the 17-foot sailboat, The Zephyr, a sturdy boat, roomy and safe for family sailing. There was a **Duxbury** yacht club where we could anchor it, with a little dinghy to row out to it. I recall pleasant, quiet sails with my father, but when the family went on a picnic there were always contentions. It took me some time to realize that it was my brother who created them, although I'll admit to organize a lot of people, small children, Harriet pregnant, was complicated. Just before Billy was born there was a trained nurse, my brother would be the doctor, but the nurse, knowing nothing of boats was opposed to the picnic, my brother for it. We went.

The plan was to sail to **Saquish** Beach and the lovely sand dunes, and with the turn in the tide sail home. We loaded everybody on board, Harriet, four kids (Mary age two), all the picnic junk, the nurse was by the tiller, Donald on the dock, ready to fend off, and jump on board. I hauled up the sail, which began to flap wildly, there was quite a bit of wind, and the stupid nurse, frightened by the flapping sail, hauled in and held tight the main sheet. With all the weight on board the boat tipped, with a ton of water coming in, Donald screaming, "Let go the main sheet!" the nurse, not understanding a sheet was a rope, hung on tighter, everyone shouting, "Let go, you idiot!" Everyone but Donald was soaked to the waist, and buckets of water to be bailed out before we could start. Eventually we dried off, had an excellent sail and picnic, and got safely home. Billy was born the next day quietly at home, and not on the **Saquish** beach as the nurse predicted.

I vaguely remember that episode, especially the sight of the water pouring over the gunwale and my father's shouting. I think my panic must have set up a fear of drowning in me which generalized to anything connected with the idea of swimming in the ocean. Picnicking on **Saquish**, however, was a source of intense joy, so that the two most intense experiences in my life could be either tremendously fearful or equally pleasurable.

I suspect the no-nonsense attitude of both my parents which governed our household made it impossible for them to comprehend the terrors which seem to have served for me as a backdrop to the daily joys of our summertime lives - and certainly made the fact of such terrors incomprehensible to my parents, who pooh-poohed them, deeming me a "notional" child.

A memory of a blurry, non-sequential, almost hypnagogic kind pops up unattached to the specific event of my little brother Billy's birth - although it must have happened during this time period. Thus, I have a kind of nightmare image of my mother in bed, screaming, in a small, dark room toward the back of our house and of blood on the wall next to her. I interpret this as representing Billy's birth. I have absolutely no way of knowing whether I actually experienced this image or not, and if I did, if it really happened. It may have been a bad dream. All I know is that she had both of my little brothers at home, so it's barely possible that I could somehow have been a secret witness to at least one of those labors.

Be that as it may, my little brother Billy, was born in **Duxbury** in July, 1921 - and my youngest brother Peter, two years later, bringing to six the total number of her children - three of them Ethel's, three hers, all born in less than eight years' time!

My father's weekend visits were irresistibly exciting to us all, but dangerous, as far as I was concerned. The delights of his presence included nature walks in which the three of us "little ones" would compete to hold his hand - trips to nearby Plymouth, to see Plymouth Rock and hear stories of the Pilgrims - watching sandlot baseball games or picking blueberries in the pasture next door - the deliciousness of blueberry slump with lemon sauce. I remember the "cowpats" in the pasture to be avoided by bare feet, and the excitement of "Prisoners' Base" at sunset with the entire family plus other children from the neighborhood joining in.

Oddly enough, my mother's reminiscences leave out any mention of **Duxbury**. My aunt Katie, however, gives an eloquent account in her reminiscences of her part in our summer idyll, as follows:

Back at home Donald and Harriet had bought a farm at **Duxbury**, next to the library. There was a big house, barn, extensive fields in back, a huge vegetable garden and a cow, no less, which a cousin of Harriet's who needed a job took over, and was general milkman, farmer.

My parents built a "portable house" which was not very portable when it was once set up. It came in great sections, clapboarding on the outside, wood on the inside, a window already built in. Of course there were sections of floor, of roof, sections of a kitchen, a bath, a screened-in porch. There were explicit directions how to assemble the parts, and bolt them together. With the help of two local carpenters they soon had a double screen porch, a double living room, two rather narrow bedrooms, and a kitchen with built-in shelves, a place for a kerosene stove and a kitchen sink. For some reason they didn't have a bathroom the first year, but had a small outhouse built - their house was called The Barnacle, the out-house The Binnacle.

The next summer when I was home all summer after my junior year they added a much more comfortable bathroom with a stall shower, wash basin, toilet and a little window. It was all wired for electricity, and so tightly built, with a Franklin stove in the living room, they could keep warm on cold days, and, using the porch, keep cool on hot days. The porch had awnings for rain, for drafts and for privacy, and Dot and I were to sleep out there, but we brought back from Sunapee which we were renting each summer a large double-roof canvas tent. The carpenters built a flooring, and with army mosquito netting over each bed we slept there.

... On the other side of this summertime farm was the John Alden estate. There was a house with some Alden still living in it, and every summer Aldens from all over the United States would gather for an extended family get-together. The ground was also used as a **Duxbury** baseball field. Our "portable house" was placed the other side of the fence, and every Saturday my father would take out a chair and sit on our side of the fence and watch the baseball game and cheer the **Duxbury** team.

As a Christmas present Harriet had a long garden dug deep alongside our house, cutting off top soil, adding proper drainage, with the result that everything grew spectacularly. It was planted with shrubs and perennials, and space for a few annuals, and a bird bath and feeding station at one corner. It attracted an unusual variety of birds, and my mother could sit on the screened porch and watch. Even if the birds didn't like the seeds they all liked a drink and a splashing bath. The

place, particularly our little house and garden, had great charm, and the whole area was interesting historically. I joined a garden club and helped to work in the flower show.

Another terrifying memory only reappeared as a result of my mother's mentioning the event shortly before she died. What came into my mind as she spoke was a confused mixture of intense fear, loud noises, a bad smell and blood. In those days both tonsillectomy and adenoidectomy were virtually universal as a pediatric practice because of the dangers of frequent colds, with middle ear infections and mastoiditis as all too frequent complications. We four oldest children had enlarged adenoids, so my father decided to remove them during the summer, while he was on vacation. He asked a medical colleague who was a GP in the village of **Duxbury** to do the actual extraction, while he administered "drop ether" on the kitchen table. For him, this would have been no serious issue, having been a "M.A.S.H." (or its WWI equivalent) surgeon overseas!

For me, at the age of three-and-one-half, however, it was the apparent end of my young life! What I remember now is the screaming, the terrifying smell of ether, and the sight of each of my older siblings in turn, starting with my sister Jeanne (nearly seven years old) and progressing to each of my twin brothers (five years old), being carried out of the kitchen draped limply, still unconscious, over my mother's outstretched arms, head down, with blood dripping from their mouths! She was carrying them upstairs to their bedroom, to lay them on the bed with their heads hanging over the edge, to drip into basins, until they were fully conscious. But for me, knowing my father's frequent and unrestrained rages, it seemed to my three-year-old mind that what was happening was that he was cutting their throats, with my mother's assistance - and that I was next!

I suppose this event is one of the origins of the familial judgment that I was a "notional child." At any rate, I'm sure I put up as much of a battle against being etherized as I could muster, not wishing to depart this life so early! It did not avail, of course, and I too lost my adenoids! It seems to have escaped my notice that we all survived this ordeal! My recollection is that no one thought to tell me what was happening - but it seems more likely that they tried, but I made up my own story about it, being terrified - and "notional!"

These episodes of the apparent looming of sudden death seem to have triggered a source of doubt in me of my right to survive - which is still in the process of healing. In moments of acute stress or crisis, I revert to a total conviction of imminent death, unreal as it doubtless is - at least on the scale of objective reality! This reaction pattern has been a source of shame and guilt to me, but even fourteen years of therapy hasn't totally eliminated it, so I expect my task is to learn to let it be OK that I sometimes fall into it. In a way the fact makes it easier to understand my father's own rage pattern, since there is a mythological story about him that he himself was run over by a fully-loaded manure wagon at the age of two or three, had his chest crushed in, and then recovered fully! His mother called him her "India rubber boy." Who knows, really? He does not mention it in his memoirs, however.

But children heal quickly, at least on the surface, and I was no exception. Peter, the last of our six, was born at the end of May when Billy was almost two, I was four, the twins were six, and Jeanne was almost eight. Jeanne and I were good friends, as the snapshots of this time show clearly. The right-hand pictures shows my mother holding Peter as a new baby in his swaddling blanket and here he is the following summer, looking slightly alarmed by my ministrations:

I remember long walks with Jeanne along a delightful walkway across town called Lover's Lane, which led us to Duxbury's back cove, a quiet inlet whose shore was blue mud, which made for wonderful clam-digging. We loved to visit a family with lots of children our ages who lived close to the cove in a little house. I also had a friend Ruby who used to come over to play dolls with me. I can remember a child's chest filled with odds and ends that I loved to rummage in for treasures and a big framed engraving entitled "La Flute des Champs," of two children, a boy and a girl, that hung on the wall in the upstairs bedroom where I played. The boy is carving a flute for the girl, who watches admiringly. I still have the picture, and it is still one of my favorites.

I have vivid memories of churning fresh strawberry ice cream in a wooden bucket filled with ice and salt, in which stood a covered container filled with the ice cream mixture made from our own strawberries, sugar and cream separated from the milk produced by our cow, with a handle that had to be turned and turned until the inside mixture thickened to ice cream! We all took turns churning, and also fought for the privilege of licking the dasher afterwards. Strawberry ice cream is still my favorite flavor!

We grew lots of fresh corn in our garden, and it was served at our long dining room table wrapped in a damask napkin, steam rising from the mound of ears inside. The smell was ecstatic! But that was all we were allowed to savor. It was not considered safe for children to eat corn on the cob because of the danger of diarrhea. So we had to watch our parents and whoever else might be eating with us devouring the ears, waiting breathlessly for each ear to be discarded, when it would be grabbed up and sucked dry by one or another of us, this being the compromise reached by my parents, evidently, that made it OK for them to enjoy something we were denied. We accepted this situation without complaint, however, and enjoyed the bits of each kernel left on the cob. I remember that my father's were particularly desirable, because he did not glean the last remnants from the rows but left quite a bit of corn to be gnawed off by my young teeth.

My mother had a Model T Ford car, which my father used to drive down and back from Boston. I remember that Frank, my father's German chauffeur, used to take it completely apart in the barn, clean or replace parts if they were worn, and finally put it all back together again! I have a clear image of the barn floor strewn with big black pieces of metal.

We also had a Buick "touring car" with removable sides that could be buttoned on in cold weather and left off in the summer, for family outings. I love the snapshot of me below at the wheel of the car, so apparently lacking in anxiety! My relative confidence was not to survive for long, alas.

In the "Puick" (as Frank called it), my father would sometimes drive us to the ocean-facing beach at Powder Point in fine weather to swim, dig clams, build a fire for a picnic - and then build sand castles on the beach, working as a frantic team to keep out the tide that rose inexorably to wash away its walls.

These outings filled me with an ecstasy of delight - and an underlying sense of apprehension - probably based on my fear that what had happened on the "duck" (i.e., the Zephyr) might happen again. This tentative belief was made comprehensible to me by my father's pattern of rages born out of impatience and frustration when things did not go well for him - and especially when one of his children violated one of his rules. Thus, each time we rounded the curve in the road leading to the bridge that led out to Powder Point I would be sure that this time the car wouldn't make it, but would sail off into the water and we would be trapped under it and drown. When we crossed the long, wooden-floored bridge, the slats of which rippled ominously as we passed over them, I would be equally sure that one of those slats would break and we would be plunged into the water below! Death seemed to me always to lurk nearby behind the scenes.

The summer I was four and a half, my father seems to have decided that it was time for me to learn to swim. I think he was aware of how easily terrified I became, and believed he could wean me from my fear response by taking me through it to an equal awareness of how unnecessary it was - like John Watson's little Albert and the white rabbit he conditioned him first to fear and then to love, using Pavlovian methods!

When we did not go to Powder Point we often swam in the yacht club basin, which also had a white beach. Not yet having learned to swim, I liked to dig in the sand with my little brother Billy, who had just turned three. One day my father came in out of the deep water close to where I was digging and said to me, "How would you like to go for a ride on my foot, Mary?" The idea scared me, but his confident smile was so commanding, I didn't quite dare to say no, so I timidly agreed. He led me out into the water and lay back, holding his foot out. "Hold onto my toes and I'll tow you out," he said. I grasped his toes with both hands, and he began swimming backwards out into the water. I soon realized I was in deep water being towed even further out into the yacht basin. Every so often the waves stirred up by his arms and

the other leg as he swam splashed onto my face, which alarmed me a little, but I tried to smile and nod back as he kept saying, "Isn't this fun?" When we had come close to where our little sailboat was moored, he suddenly pulled his foot away from me, saying, "Swim, now, Mary. That's right, you can do it, keep moving your arms and legs. Kick, Mary, keep it up!"

All this time, his foot was just out of reach of my desperate fingers, and he paid no attention to my choking screams. "Daddy," I kept screaming, "Daddy! Daddy! ..." I wasn't even aware of the fact that I was in fact swimming! The water kept splashing up into my mouth and ears, and I kept choking and screaming, while my hands were busy paddling frantically as I tried to reach the wide, bone-white foot with its five toes that loomed just out of reach! This seemed to go on forever, until finally he said, "All right, here we are, Mary," and steered me to the iron rungs that led from the water to the top of the yacht club float, boosting me up so I could climb them. As I climbed, shaking and weak as a newborn, I looked up, to see a forest of white legs above me! The entire yacht club had apparently heard my screams and had run out to see what was going on! I felt entirely humiliated at being in such a public setting for what felt to me like my failure to have acted as one is supposed to at my age! I felt I had failed both myself and my father for screaming and attracting people as witnesses to my terror!

It was several years before I could bring myself once more to learn to swim. The fear of choking to death even extended to bath time, especially when it came time for my mother to shampoo my hair. Her way of rinsing off the shampoo was to lay me back against her arm and gently splash off the soapy suds. But after the incident at the Yacht Club cove I couldn't even tolerate this sensation, which aroused my intense fear all over again. I give my mother credit for realizing how deep that fear went and giving up on the technique – although I have no memory of what she might have done instead.

As the summers went by I did try, on my own, to learn to swim, many, many times, but always sank below the surface of the water. It wasn't until I was a Brownie Scout at a Girl Scout summer camp near Plymouth when I was eight or nine that the spell somehow broke and I discovered my natural buoyancy! After that momentous event, you couldn't keep me out of the water in the summer!

I guess the Fourth of July was our most exciting day. Every year we celebrated from early daybreak until well into the evening. During the day there were plenty of fireworks, including what we called caps, which were wrapped in pink tissue paper filled with gravel and a little explosive cap and thrown on the ground where they exploded with a fine (but safe) bang! These were for little kids. For the bigger boys, who loved to scare the girls, there were both "ladycrackers," which you set off in a whole pack, and packs of regular firecrackers, which you set off one at a time. These were lit with a long "punk," which I think was camel dung on a stick, which burned very slowly, and could be used to fire off lots of firecrackers. You could light one and then throw it under or near the feet of any girl in the vicinity, thereby eliciting a very satisfying scream. And - best of all, there were "salutes," which were *really* loud and scary! For girls, that is. Boys sometimes shot off fingers, but they were not scared, of course, being boys! They also had a little brass cannon, supplied by my father, perhaps from his childhood, which would shoot off a regular-size firecracker, and which you would load with some sort of projectile. Girls were allowed to watch, but not fire them.

There was always a rousing game of prisoner's base during the twilight hours after supper, and then the culmination, after nine-thirty when it had gotten quite dark - an evening of grown-up fireworks brought from Boston by my father and set off by him, complete with rockets, pinwheels and plenty of sparklers to be whirled in the dark! My father was assisted by the twins, amidst much jockeying for the role of first helper, and the rest of us all watched - or, in the case of my brother Billy and me, ran around excitedly as close to the pinwheels and rockets as we dared, shrieking and chasing in the intervals between firings. I managed to run under a pinwheel that was spinning off goutts of molten material as it whirled, and a drop of it landed on top of my head, where it burned its way into my scalp creating much excitement as I screamed. The skin on my scalp continued to burn for a while until the fiery blob was finally brushed off! I'm afraid my screaming stopped the fireworks for the night, as the sudden emergency took precedence over the entertainment. I still have the bare spot where the hair never grew back, but it's grown much smaller with age. Come September, my mother began parting my hair on the side for school, to hide the round scar the size of a dime that was left from the encounter. I love the tinted picture of the six of us below, on the running board of the Buick, but my expression is one of anxiety - or so it seems to me.

Heading back to West Newton after the events of this summer, things began to change for me. Looking forward to entering kindergarten, snapshots show me wearing glasses. My right eye had turned in from the time I began focusing on people's faces, and had not straightened out spontaneously, so my mother had finally taken me to an ophthalmologist, who prescribed glasses with corrective lenses. I also remember a visit to an orthopedic doctor around this same time and being told to bend over and "tuck in my tail" as I straightened up slowly. I did my best to do this, but without success. My pelvis, which I held rigidly in a backward position, remained rigid throughout my life until some time in the nineties, when it suddenly let loose during a neo-Reichian workshop my friend Ron Kurtz was conducting at our school! I have no idea when it had begun to tighten up, but I suspect it may have been some time around this age. My facial expressions in these pictures strike me as different from the relatively insouciant look I had previously had, although I can't really characterize that difference. I suspect it may have been somehow related to the repeated fear-engendering episodes that had occurred in my short life. It's as though I needed to be on guard lest such things happen again without warning.

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